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DEPARTMENT FOR AF, DS, AND CA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2017

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [ET](#)

SUBJECT: EAC ON ETHIOPIA-ERITREA SITUATION

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reason 1.4 (D)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (S) Embassy Addis Ababa convened a core Emergency Action Committee (EAC) meeting on October 26 to discuss the situation between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Despite mounting tensions and increased rhetoric on both sides of the border, the core EAC assesses that there is little evidence that a resumption of armed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is eminent. The EAC believes that an outbreak of conflict, if it were to happen, would result from an intentional political decision and that the Ethiopian Government (GoE) is unlikely to take unilateral offensive action unless substantively provoked. If Eritrea were to initiate conflict, the EAC assesses that Ethiopia would be prepared and capable to respond overwhelmingly within 24-48 hours. The EAC further assesses that, if sufficiently provoked to take offensive action, the GoE would notify Post and or the AF/FO directly prior to acting. While the EAC does not believe that the rising tensions represent a threat to American citizens in Ethiopia now, Post will send out a Warden Message to remind American citizens of the existing Warden Message issued on March 8, 2007 advising American citizens to exercise caution when traveling close to the Ethiopia-Eritrea border. Post will continue to monitor developments along the border actively and the emphasize to senior GoE officials that the resumption of conflict would have a devastating economic, humanitarian, and political impact on Ethiopia and the region.

¶2. (U) The DCM chaired the EAC meeting which was attended by the Ambassador, RSO, PAO, DATT, Pol/Econ Chief, and a representative from ORA.

MOUNTING TENSIONS

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¶3. (S) Mounting tensions along the Ethiopia-Eritrea border stem from the planned "demarcation" of the border by the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) on November 27, 2007 using geographical coordinates. Evidence of the mounting tensions include: an increase of thousands of troops along both sides of the border, deliveries of military vehicles and heavy equipment toward the border, Eritrean President Isaias' early-October visit to the border to assess conditions, and the close proximity of opposing troops at several points along the border. Other possible indicators include the presence of the Ethiopian Defense Chief General

Samora and six other Tigrean generals in northern Ethiopia on October 25 and the rifts emerging within the leadership of the Eritrean governing regime stemming from the recent assassination attempt on the Deputy Security Chief in Asmara.

#### POST'S ASSESSMENT

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¶4. (S) Despite the mounting tension, Post does not believe that an outbreak of conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea is imminent. Both Ethiopia and Eritrea currently oppose the planned EEBC "demarcation," so the likelihood of one side seizing on that event as a trigger to take offensive action is not high. Senior Ethiopian officials continue to emphasize that Ethiopia will not take unilateral offensive action. Recent discussions between the Pol/Econ Chief and MFA's director of Legal Affairs reveal that the GoE does not currently believe that it has an adequate legal theory of defense for taking offensive action. The significant assessed superiority of the Ethiopian military over Eritrean forces is unlikely to prompt Eritrea to take unilateral offensive action in light of the level of Ethiopian defensive forces and preparedness along the border. PolOff and DeskOff report that the military's operations tempo in Zela Ambessa -- a border town that was a major site of conflict during the 1998-2000 war -- as of October 24 was very low among observed Ethiopian troops.

¶5. (S) Post assesses, however, that should conflict resume between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the GoE would pursue the conflict to Asmara with the intent of toppling the government of Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. Nevertheless, in meetings with several senior Eritrean opposition leaders in

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recent weeks, all have been unanimous in their assessment that if the Eritrean regime fell today, Eritrea would suffer from a power vacuum as no single party in Eritrea or among the opposition groups has adequate capacity or support in the near term to bring the Eritrean people together or to establish a new or transitional regime.

#### NOTIFYING AMERICAN CITIZENS

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¶6. (SBU) While the EAC does not assess that there is an immediate threat to American citizens in Ethiopia, the EAC decided that it would be prudent to re-issue the March 8, 2007 Warden Message that advised American citizens to exercise caution when traveling near the Ethiopia-Eritrea border. The Consular Section will, however, track the number and dispersion of American citizens near the northern border to assess the scope of assistance which may be required if conditions change suddenly for the worse.

#### TRIPWIRES

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¶7. (S) Despite Post's current assessment, the EAC has identified the following tripwires as evidence of a possible increase in the possibility of conflict:

--Activation or increased preparedness at Ethiopian military and civilian hospitals near the border;

--Contracting of commercial buses for troop deployments toward the border;

--GoE restrictions on foreigners' and journalists' travel to, and along, the border areas;

--Suspension of SMS and other mobile telecommunications services;

--The movement of wheeled and tracked personnel carriers and other military conveyances closer to areas where troops are

currently deployed;

--The GoE holding a national blood drive (as was done in the lead-up to the 1998-2000 war);

--The movement of artillery closer to the border;

--The deployment of fuel reserves closer to the border;

--Another assassination attempt in Eritrea against a prominent Eritrean Government official; and

--Prime Minister Meles directly informing Ambassador or AF/FO of Ethiopia's intention to take action.

The EAC notes, however, that the seemingly erratic behavior of Eritrean President Isaias stands out as a wild card which may circumvent many of these tripwires.

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